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“THE SONG-MAKERS”

BY MARY AUSTIN

THE talk had been going on for nearly an hour without affording me an occasion for saying anything, which was exceedingly tiresome.

“The fact is,” said the Professor, and the rest of the company agreed with him, “that the only place you can hear Wagner as he should be, is at Beyreuth.” The pines outside quivered at this announcement, and a bleary old sea fog came and peered through the panes at us. Suddenly the fire-log snapped asunder.

The red glow leaped into a three-inch point of flame. Instantly the fog caught it by reflection a rod outside and made of it a desert camp-fire spiring upward from the crossed ends of the back log. Dark against it by some superior sort of refraction from my mind I could see the dreaming face of my friend Tinnemaha, the Medicine-man.

What I thought the Professor had said was that the only place nowadays where you could see any genuine song-dancing is in Shoshone Land, and, out of the velvet desert dark beyond, Kern River Jim answered him.

“But in the old days,” said he, “right here in Sagharanite there was a Chisera who could sing the wind up out of the west with the rains behind it; and she could sing the rain away, too, when she had done with it; and you could no more be still when you heard her than the wind could, but you must get upon your feet and dance what she sang.”

“In Shoshone Land,” said Tinnemaha, “I remember a man who could dance the heart out of your bosom. He made a rattle of ram’s horn stopped with a round of mescal stem, and would keep time with it. He taught me to dance some of his songs for a bag of taboose, but I could never match with him, for the best of his singing was that he made it new for every occasion.”

What the Professor was actually saying at that moment was that Wagner's intellectuality made it improbable that the French should ever be able to interpret him, but I went on listening to Tinnemaha, for, besides being much the same sort of talk, it was vastly more interesting.

"Nowadays in the schools," said he, "they teach our children white men's songs, but they do not lay hold on your insides as the old songs do. White man's songs, they talk too much." He dropped out of his native speech into the clipped English in which he courteously held any criticism of white men's ways should be couched. "White man sings too much with his mouth," said he, "but Shoshone sings here"—he extended his hand across his body, palm inward, with that most expressive gesture of the Indian to include the whole region of the solar plexus, the seat of the Inside Man who sings and is sung to—"here." The hand moved outward, slightly clutching at the strings of sympathy.

"Sometimes," he went on, "you see Indian man singin' an' dancin'; he cryin' while he singin'. 'Tain't the words that make him cry. I'ss what he thinkin' 'bout when he sing."

"Last night," said Kern River Jim, "I dreamed that I sang, and when I awoke I was crying, but my song had gone from me."

"It was the wolf-song," said Tinnemaha; and we were quiet while the flames lapped and flickered, musing on what I have told you in another place, how there was a man who, when the people met together, had no song and greatly desired one and was unhappy over it. Then one day he bought a song from the wolf for a basket of tule roots and sang it amid the tribe that night until the earth under him was beaten to a fine dust and he fell into the deep trance which waits beyond the last ecstasy of song.

So the wolf came in the night and stole his song away. I remembered me of an equally old tale of a Saxon singer, and I thought, Beast-god or Man-god, the myth told quite as much as I had been able to fathom for myself of the source of all songs, dropping into the mind spread to receive them, quietly as the shed ashes of the fire.

"But all your songs," I wished to know, "do they come so from inside you?"

"Every man's own song," they averred, "the one he makes for himself, and no one dares sing without his per-

mission. But sometimes when it is a very good song he bequeaths it to his friend, and the tribe uses it; other times a man's song is so precious that no one gets to know very well what it is about, and it dies with him.”

“And when does a man make a song?”

“How can I tell?” questioned Tinnemaha. “It is when his Inside Man is raised up within him. Perhaps when he has killed his first buck or made a woman to know that he is man. When his son is born or his enemy is slain. Who knows his great moment?”

“There was one I knew,” said Kern River Jim, “who made a song when he was drunk. Three days he had herded the Bar-N cattle up Tunawai in a sand-storm, scarcely eating or sleeping while the storm lasted, and when it was done the foreman gave him as much whiskey as he liked, and when he was well drunken he made a song.” Jim's eyes twinkled. “It was a good song.”

I remembered to have heard that air, the most lugubrious Indian melody I had known, and thought I should have felt just that way if I had been thoroughly intoxicated, but Jim esteemed it humorous.

We fell a-talking then of the songs that are not personal, but come down to the people from old times: cradle-songs, love-songs, songs for the beginning and the end of journeys.

Tinnemaha stood up and began to sing one of Victory:

“Ha . . . ah—a,
Ha . . . ah—a!”

A sharp, throaty noise, as if the Inside Man had waked and fed on what he relished:

“Ha . . . ah—a!”

while the Medicine-man stamped and swayed:

“Come, O ye buzzards,
The feast is prepared!
Ha . . . ah!”

until I could fairly hear the sweep of their wide wings between the naked dead and naked heaven.

“My father saw that song made when he was a young man and we fought the Mojaves. We had killed the best of their fighting men and taken away their weapons, for they had long arrows that entangled in the brush so that they could not shoot so fast as our men with the shorter shafts.

The dead were beginning to swell, and one of our men danced among them and made a song.

"Then one and another of ours took it from him, and all the way home they danced it until the women heard them returning on the trails. So the song came to the Shoshones."

"And do you always dance when you sing?"

"How else should it be?" said Tinnemaha, with mild amazement.

"First," said he, "the song *is*, then there are three things—the dance and the music—

"Ha . . . ah—a!"

The muscles of his chest rippled under the thin cotton shirt, the throaty syllables gurgled out of him as though jarred by the rhythm of his dancing. "And then," he finished, "there are the words. Sometimes the words are very old and are forgotten, and the people make new words, but it is not a new song because of that. The song is behind them."

It flashed upon me inwardly as accounting for the accompaniment of meaningless syllables that ran along with much of their tribal ceremonial, swelling with the movement of the ritual into even billows of song with just a sentence or two like a ruffle of foam on the crest of each; the song behind the song singing itself out of all their memories and knowledges.

"Give me that song again which you danced for me at the beginning of wild almond bloom," I begged, beating with my hands a sketch of the body rhythm that accompanied it.

"The grass is on the mountain,"

crooned Kern River Jim. "It is a very old song of the Paiutes."

"And the song behind it?" I urged.

"Oh, a long time

The snow is over all the mountain.

The deer have come down and the big-horn,

They have passed over Waban.

A long time now we have eaten seeds

And dried flesh of the summer's killing,

We are wearied of our huts.

The mists have come down like a tent,

They have hid the mountain.

And on a day suddenly comes the sun.

The mists are withered away,

The grass is seen on the mountain!"

“Therefore,” said Jim, “we make a dance and go to the meadow to look for taboose and the young shoots of the tule.

“Also,” said he, “I remember a song a woman made to me on Kern River. I had come to it late in the evening and found it big with rains. The woman had a wickiup on the other side and went about her fire to tend the cakes; I called across to her, but I did not attempt the river because of the flood, and I saw that the woman was alone and no man came to her. By and by when it was dark she piled pitchy boughs on the fire till it leaped up and showed the straight high pines and the river between us like a thick, hurrying snake. Then she made a song and I heard it above the water. So I went into the river as I was, and the woman pulled me out half dead on the other side. But I did not mind it because of the song.”

“And the song was?”

“The fire burns,” quoted Jim. “It leaps up and nobody is warmed by it. Though it was a very long time ago, I have never forgotten it.” I did not ask him for the song behind that. . . .

Once when I had tried to persuade Poco Bill to render a love-song he had refused on the ground that “white men don’t like those kind of words. Thass all right song for Paiute, but with white man those words mean bad.” Later when one of the women translated the song for me I felt how immeasurably we had dropped behind the Indian in having no words with which to communicate the issues of life except such as “mean bad.”

“But still,” I insisted, “I do not understand why you must dance. We also have many songs, but we do not dance to them.”

Something drifted down to me just then from the talk going on over my head to remind me that when the white man sings best and most expensively he comes as near dancing as is compatible with the utmost breath: feet of innumerable choruses twinkled across my memory, but I didn’t exactly see my way to explain that to the Medicine-man. I had heard a great deal that evening of how a certain cantatrice had waved her arms and swung her magnificent torso in the part of Lucia; there was not a whisper of why. I had seen the bucks in the beginning of October pawing up the earth in deep ravines, pawing and tossing their branched foreheads with a slow, majestic rhythm, and once at Buena

Vista, where the slough fell over the ruined drop into the vast reedy lagoon, long since drained away to profitable fields, there in the middle of the hot morning mist I had seen the dipping of the pelicans to their mates, the strange wing-bowing, the retreats and advances of tall water-birds, with the white expanse of wing feather against the fawn-colored land, most like the extended arms and floating draperies that flee forever about the red ground of an Etruscan vase. I had seen these and divers wonders that, with due respect to Mr. Darwin, I didn't altogether accept as the procreant urge of the world.

That was a good theory as far as it went, but it failed to explain the dance of the Grass on the Mountain, nor why the tenor felt obliged to declare his undying opposition to the basso with both arms at length in the direction of his chest expansion.

At any rate, it would be interesting to know what the Medicine-man said of it. He said it very much to the point.

"We dance always," said he. "It is the shortest road to the Friend of the Soul of Man."

I had heard more or less of this Friend among all the Indians I had known or known about, under various names: Great Spirit, The Mystery, The Power, The Trues, God or Holy Ghost. It has nothing to do with their ordinary spirits or supernaturals, has no appearance and no history. It is the supreme intelligence, perhaps, that plane of consciousness touched in great crises along which runs from mind to mind communicating fire. Through it cures are affected and messages transmitted from the dead.

"By dancing," said the Medicine-man, "the Inside Man erects itself, it is lifted up, it lays hold on the Friend; then singing comes, and many things are possible that were not."

"What things?"

Tinnemaha considered. "Do you know Mahala Joe?"

"Who was condemned to wear a woman's dress because he once ran away from battle?"

"He was scarcely grown and it was his first fight," said the Medicine-man, excusingly. "But it is not an easy thing to appear as a woman in the face of men, and Joe has told me often that unless he had danced greatly, until the Friend knew him for a very man, he could not have continued in it."

"It was he," continued Jim, "who danced the fear out of our minds during the great sickness."

This was an epidemic of pneumonia which decimated the campodies a few years back, and Tinnemaha nearly lost his life in it, according to the Paiute law, because his own dancing failed to check the progress of the disorder.

“That,” he acknowledged, “was because there was no fear in the mind of Mahala Joe. But it is true that by dancing much for one’s self the power grows. There was Carson Charlie. His father had been shot by a Washoe in a very old quarrel, and Charlie should have killed the killer, but he had been to Carson to school where they showed him the Jesus road and he was soft-hearted. Then I took him apart in the hills, for his father was my friend and it is not right that the son should grow fat while the killer of his father is abroad. Three days we danced and sang together, and it was not easy for Charlie, he had been to school so long; but I taught him our ancient dances. Three days I strove with him, fasting, and in the end he found the Friend.”

“And—?” I queried—the flicker of a smile played on the face of Tinnemaha—“and he was also not so soft-hearted.”

He took up my thought and carried it on beyond the personal instance. “It is so,” he said; “by dancing power comes to medicine the souls of men.”

“And the bodies?” But, in fact, he had no phrases to signify the partition of man into physical and spiritual which is the graft of theology on an unscientific observation of life.

What he really believed was that if the Inside Man was invulnerable, as he might be made by Good Medicine, to assault of weapon or disease, so would his outside be. I had seen a Shoshone Medicine-dancer cure an abscess on the lungs by this method, and a Methodist Evangelist brings souls to healing by singing of hymns and pounding the pulpit, and found the processes not entirely dissimilar, but it hadn’t occurred to me until now to attempt the valuation of literature and art on the same basis. O Dante! O Bach! The shortest road to the Friend of the Soul of Man!

I explained to Tinnemaha that we had songs and other matters of our own with which merely to be confronted was to be shot upward into the plane of power, but we hadn’t been able, except in rare instances, to manage it with our dances.

“That,” said the Medicine-man, “is because you do not dance to yourselves.” He went on to say that once when he

had been to Reno, in the matter of the Washoe Boundary Dispute, he had seen some dancing-women at a theater, and he was quite explicit as to the effect upon his outside. But when a man danced to himself and the Friend, it was otherwise. He thought it was reasonable, the Inside Man being so entangled with the body that when it began to move itself aright the body would respond first, and when, by free motion the spirit ascended, then the song came and visions and healing.

"It is so," he explained, "that it is more fortunate to die in battle. For if a man dies before disease has eaten him, he can the better make his song." . . . It had taken, of course, much more explanation than this, on divers occasions, for me to understand that death to an Indian is no such catastrophe as we modernly conceive it; rather an incident which even their gods and Great Ones are liable to suffer, but it needed no further touch just then to have me see in all manner of dying rites, death songs, battle cries, extreme unction, a vine of the spirit climbing till it laid hold on the Friend and sustained itself in the swelling of Jordan. I knew without doubt where I should go if I died immediately upon reading:

"I was with Hercules and Cadmus once
When in the woods of Crete they bayed the bear."

Good Medicine! There I had the whole business of song-makers; painted songs, printed songs, or whatever; not to preach, not to please merely, but to make a short road to the mood of power, to touch the Friend. But you had by Tinnemaha's account to touch him yourself first, to swing up by the skirts of the Great Moment and to let down a hand to stumbling men.

The fire snapped and went out; the two ends of the back log burned so far asunder that unless you had seen the live flame at work on them you couldn't have told that they belonged together any more than the two ends of the conversations—mine with the Medicine-man, and the talk within the room, which had by this time fallen off into that reminiscent exchange of dates and places, as to when you last heard Melba or where you saw the portrait of Whistler's mother, which many estimable folk pursue determinedly under the fond imagination that they are talking Art.

As the company rose for breaking up I stood up with

them, and it occurred to somebody to inquire why I hadn't said anything for quite an hour.

“I was thinking,” I said by way of reply, “that I should like to write a song like this.”

I swung my arms out, palms upward, the chest raised, the body slightly swaying forward, saluting the six Quarters, as I had seen the Medicine-man in the business of the cure of souls, and the company, especially the younger portion of it, looked at me commiseratingly. They understood that it was not my fault that I hadn't at that time had the advantage of the Metropolitan Museum and Covent Garden, and they meant, of course, to be kind. I could see the Professor, visibly in the interest of hospitality, hold back a disposition to lecture me. But they do not know even yet why I didn't particularly mind it.

MARY AUSTIN.